

Vermont's Key Environmental Challenges & Opportunities

A 2022 Guide for Candidates

Vermont Conservation Voters (VCV) and **Vermont Natural Resources Council (VNRC)** are pleased to offer the 2022 candidates for elected office information on some of the most pressing issues facing Vermont. We aim to provide a brief overview of critical issues and opportunities for action — from addressing climate change, ensuring clean water for all, protecting people from toxic chemicals, building sustainable communities with smart growth housing, and maintaining healthy forests and wildlife.



The climate crisis is one of the most pressing issues facing our state, nation, and world. Vermont must do its part to reduce pollution and cut costs while supporting more resilient communities. We believe climate solutions can and must be structured in ways that help ensure all Vermonters can participate and in ways that will create a more just and equitable Vermont. Further, we believe that the health of our environment is inextricably linked to the health of our democracy.

As a legislator, you will have the opportunity to vote on many policies that impact the health of our air, water, wildlife, communities, and democracy. We look forward to working with you to advance a healthy and equitable Vermont.



Vermont Conservation Voters (VCV) is the non-partisan political action arm of Vermont's environmental community. Since 1982, our mission has been to defend and strengthen the laws that safeguard our environment. We work to elect environmentally responsible candidates. We then hold legislators accountable for the decisions they make affecting our air, water, land, wildlife, communities, and health.
VermontConservationVoters.org



Through research, education, collaboration and advocacy, **Vermont Natural Resources Council (VNRC)** protects and enhances Vermont's natural environments, vibrant communities, productive working landscapes, rural character and unique sense of place, and prepares the state for future challenges and opportunities.
VNRC.org

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Addressing Climate Change

After enacting the Global Warming Solutions Act in 2020, Vermont established a [Climate Council](#) that developed and adopted Vermont's first required [Climate Action Plan](#). This Plan lays out a suite of strategies necessary to drive down climate pollution and meet our Global Warming Solutions Act pollution reduction targets; cut energy costs; strengthen community resilience; and ensure equity is front and center in how we prioritize and shape policies.

The majority of Vermont's [greenhouse gas pollution](#) (about 74%) comes from transportation and thermal – in other words, how we get around, and how we heat our homes and buildings. While we need to ensure our electric grid is powered by local, clean, renewable energy, some of Vermont's most critical work ahead is to establish regulatory tools to ensure pollution reductions in our transportation and thermal sectors.

A selection of key legislative solutions identified in the Climate Action Plan are as follows:

✓ **Cleaner Heat:** Vermont must adopt a performance-based standard, such as a Clean Heat Standard or similar regulatory approach, that will require stepped, certain, and equitable pollution reduction progress in the fossil fuel heating sector. This type of policy will help Vermonters more easily access cleaner and affordable heating solutions.



What is Environmental Justice?

Enacted in 2022, Vermont's first comprehensive Environmental Justice policy requires Vermont state agencies to incorporate environmental justice – ensuring no Vermonter is unduly harmed and all can access benefits – into their work.

Key provisions include establishing an advisory council on Environmental Justice within the Agency of Natural Resources and creating a mapping tool.

This law is an important step towards achieving meaningful community engagement in environmental decisions – particularly among overburdened communities and historically disenfranchised populations.

- ✓ **Cleaner Electricity:** Vermont must update its Renewable Energy Standard to require 1) 100% total renewable energy by 2030, 2) obligate utilities to develop more clean, new, in-state energy generation – and prioritize lower-income, historically overburdened Vermonters in accessing that clean energy, and 3) explore additional requirements on utilities to help their customers reduce their reliance on fossil fuels.
- ✓ **Cleaner Transportation:** Adopt a [cap-and-invest](#) or similar regulatory program crafted in a way that will ensure an equitable pollution reduction program in the transportation sector. This type of policy will help sustainably fund and support all Vermonters in accessing cleaner, affordable, and more diverse options for getting around.
- ✓ **Climate Investments:** Vermont will need a state budget that continues to expand investments in climate and clean energy programs, in particular those that prioritize access for lower income, historically marginalized communities. Lawmakers must also provide oversight to ensure the unprecedented FY 2023 investments in climate are expended effectively and equitably. The state should focus and prioritize investments to help lower-income communities and households access cleaner, efficient heating systems, weatherize their homes, access cleaner, efficient or electric transportation solutions, and so on.

Strengthening Climate Resilience

Sustainable Communities

Smart growth land use planning and policies invest in our downtowns and village centers, and support the economic viability of our working and natural lands. Sprawling development and growth pressures in our rural lands are likely to be exacerbated in the coming years due to increasing trends such as [telecommuting](#), online shopping, [in-migration](#), and Vermont's housing shortage. Supporting and creating thriving, compact, walkable communities is key to strengthening the resilience of Vermonters in the face of environmental, economic, and social change. Indeed, some of the most impactful climate investments Vermont can make — expanding transit services, walk/bike infrastructure, and housing options in our [designated centers](#) — are also needed to help address affordability.

Healthy Forests & Wildlife

Vermont is rich in forests, which cover approximately 74% of the state. Forests are a crucial part of what makes Vermont special. They are important to our rural economy



What is Smart Growth?

Smart growth is a pattern of land development that creates compact, walkable, transit-accessible communities with a range of affordable housing opportunities and choices. In Vermont, it builds on and maintains the state's historic settlement pattern of higher-density downtown and village centers surrounded by farm, forest, and natural areas.

and offer a host of vital benefits, such as maintaining air and water quality, offering flood resilience, protecting wildlife and helping fight climate change by sequestering and storing carbon. Vermont experienced a flurry of population growth during the pandemic, and we anticipate the state will continue to be a climate migrant destination. It's therefore critical that we are forward-thinking and establish policies to ensure we shape development in ways that will protect these essential resources by curtailing [forest fragmentation](#) while at the same time making space for new Vermont families.

Key policies and investments needed to support smart growth and strengthen community resilience include:

- ✓ **Affordable Housing:** Expand funding and eligibility for downtown and village [tax credits](#) and increase funding for the [Vermont Housing and Conservation Board \(VHCB\)](#) to build more housing in our existing downtowns and village centers.
- ✓ **Community Infrastructure:** Increase investments in [water and sewer infrastructure](#) in compact community centers to allow for additional housing development in these locations. Water and sewer facilities make land more attractive and affordable for housing development, while greater density in mixed-use centers support walkability and reduce car dependence.
- ✓ **Active and Shared Transportation:** Fully fund sustainable transportation initiatives, including updates to the [Vermont State Design Standards](#) to improve the implementation of [Complete Streets](#).
- ✓ **Act 250 Modernization:** Update [Act 250](#) to encourage housing in smart growth locations while improving protections for important natural resources—

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Strengthening Climate Resilience

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particularly by updating Act 250's criteria and jurisdiction to better protect intact, healthy forests.

✓ **Natural Resource Conservation:** Develop a plan for conserving 30% of our lands and waters by 2030—aligning Vermont with the national 30x30 initiative—and Vermont Conservation Design. In addition, support efforts to reduce the net loss of high priority and sensitive natural areas, and fund efforts to track how development is impacting these areas.

✓ **Thriving Working Lands:** Maintain increased investments in the Working Lands Enterprise Fund and the conservation programs of VHCB to support farm and forest enterprises, and invest in landowner planning and forestland conservation, particularly in areas that connect or add to large blocks of forestland, forests that contain headwater streams, or high priority watersheds.

Clean Water

Exceptional water resources are irreplaceable elements of Vermont's landscape, and are essential to Vermonters' health, well-being, and quality of life. Protecting our water resources—including our lakes, rivers, ponds, streams, and wetlands—is essential for Vermont to foster climate-resilient communities.

Vermont must maintain its focus on successfully implementing our state's Clean Water Act (Act 64) and make effective use of the influx of federal funds to modernize our water infrastructure. Further, key areas where we anticipate policy action in the coming legislative biennium include ensuring safe drinking water and better protecting our rivers and wetlands:

✓ **Safe drinking water:** One important issue that Vermont is facing is **contamination of water supplies by toxic chemicals like PFAS** (per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances). Vermonters' drinking water should be free of these harmful chemicals, and we must adopt policies to reduce the importation of toxic chemicals into our state, and hold toxic polluters strictly liable for harm they cause to our people and environment.

What is Act 250?

Enacted in 1970, Act 250 is one of the significant pieces of legislation that safe guarded Vermont's farms and forests from human sprawl, protected our natural resources and **wildlife**, and helped our towns balance growth with community health and safety.

Act 250 is an environmental review and permitting process that regulates large development in Vermont.

Modernizing Act 250

After more than 50 years in place, we have a lot to thank Act 250 for, but there is opportunity to improve and update it. By modernizing this significant piece of legislation Vermont could work to better protect our communities, and our environment. Unfortunately, while a bill to modernize Act 250 passed through the House and Senate in 2022, it was vetoed by Governor Scott. Work must continue on these important policies.

✓ **Protecting wetlands:** Wetlands are important parts of the Vermont landscape as they help minimize erosion, purify water, and offer habitat for Vermont's wildlife. Wetlands are also an important climate resilience strategy as they store carbon and reduce flooding risks. We should adopt a net gain policy by protecting and restoring wetlands.

✓ **Protecting river corridors and riparian areas:** Our rivers are the arteries of our state. We must put in place policies to better protect riparian areas (the areas along our rivers) to minimize flooding damage and reduce pollution that harms our rivers and eventually flows into our lakes, ponds, and our groundwater.



Please see our websites for further information, and let us know if you have any questions!
We look forward to working with you. [VNRC.org](https://www.vnrc.org) & [VermontConservationVoters.org](https://www.VermontConservationVoters.org)